

PREFACE

“It really does look like an ocean,” I thought to myself. Outside my car windows I swelled waves of eastern Iowa hills, glimpsed as through portholes, rolling up and down as I sailed along Route 151. The tallgrass prairie reaches of the Midwest have often been described with marine metaphors. “Prairie settlers always saw a sea or an ocean of grass,” notes Jane Smiley in *A Thousand Acres*, her novel about Iowa farming. She adds that they “could never think of any other metaphor, since most of them had lately seen the Atlantic.”¹ I was tacking across this sea to Ames, Iowa, down from Madison, Wisconsin, where I now live, for the 2022 annual meeting of the Practical Farmers of Iowa. Once again, I was feeling transported into the elation of landscape I had often sensed when I lived here twenty-some years ago.

I needed to stretch my legs after a couple of hours of driving before continuing on a couple of hours more. I pulled over into the breakdown lane to savor the view from the little-used highway I had taken. I got out, the better to soak in the prairie sublime: immense, intense, engulfing every sense.

A tidal wave of smell immediately washed over me, the sour stench of feces reeking from some hog confinement facility. There was a heaviness to the air, weighing down the breath, and I staggered a bit. I scanned the horizon all around me, but I could see only fields, most resting fallow with a buzz cut of corn stubble poking out from a light dusting of snow, it being January. The source of this palpable stench was evidently miles away, and yet its waves radiated out across the landscape to where I stood, drowning the sublime. My nose whimpering, I got back in the car and sailed on.

As I drove, the smell receded (or, worse, I was getting used to it). I was soon cruising in the sublime again, captaining my ship of a Prius. But about twenty miles later, I was thrown back overboard into reality. I turned onto Highway 30 and came upon a volcanic island in full eruption—an Archer Daniels Midland ethanol plant, belching out wastewater and heat from its twisted pipes and stacks, a great gathering point of the flows of industrialism draining in from this sea, exploding from grain and gain. It, too, was immense and intense, its massive clouds reaching up and out, towering over the road but not at all sublime, at least not to me.

Iowa, is it too late for you?



The Practical Farmers of Iowa remain convinced it's not, despite the continued industrialization of agriculture that they have likewise continued to contest since their founding in 1985—and since the first edition of this book in 2004. The sustainable agriculture movement may not, as of yet, have revolutionized agriculture in Iowa, the buckle of the Corn Belt. The agricultural “middle” is still being squeezed out as the forces of industrialism tighten down even more, promoting mega-farms and micro-farms, with precious little space for what has long been quaintly (albeit not unproblematically, as I'll discuss) called “family farms.” Indeed, over half of farm households in the United States actually lose money on their farm operation most years.² And Iowa's streams still often run brown with lost soil, and Iowa's air still often coughs with hog stink. Eaters face ever-higher prices and more uncertain supply chains, as the recent experience with COVID's effects on food availability brought more urgently to light. The current situation simply isn't working, at least not for the many. But the efforts of groups like PFI—the acronym of the Practical Farmers of Iowa—have succeeded in showing that a more agroecological way is possible, even as the buckle tightens.

Thousands of farmers are turning to PFI in response, embracing eco-friendly approaches to farming, and often in very comprehensive ways, not just around the edges of their farms and routines. In the early 2000s, PFI had some 700 members, half of them farmers—already an encouraging total in a state with, at the time, about 90,000 farms. Now Iowa is down to about 85,000 farms, but PFI is up to around 5,000 members, 90 percent of whom farm. Iowa has gone from around half a percent of farm households who are members of PFI to over 5 percent. In other words, membership has grown more than sevenfold, even in a landscape where farm numbers are shrinking.

This growing harvest of change demonstrates the basic argument of this book: that economic need is not the main barrier to sustainable agriculture. *Farming for Us All* argues that social identity, and the knowledge relations associated with identity, poses the biggest barrier. Not economics. The main crop that a farmer grows is the self, a social self, seeking acknowledgment, recognition, dignity, worth, and purpose from the relational ecology of living life, as we must, with others. To change how you farm is to change that ecology too. To grow differently is to be differently. Different friends. Different knowledge. Different tissues of trust that connect what you know with whom you know. The decisive change stems from the social relations of the heart, not the economic relations of the wallet.

Cultivation of a farm entails what this book calls the *cultivation of knowledge*: the way we nurture self and knowledge within networks of social trust. Not only farmers cultivate knowledge. We all do. We have to. Most of what we know we

learn from others—yes, often tested against our own experience, but generally quite incompletely. Each of us is only one person with one life. We don't have the time or the means to first test most of what we try to put into action, or to first test what we decide is ill-advised and best avoided. We don't have time for surprise, or for failure. So we ask others—others whom we trust—about their experiences and what they have heard about the experiences of others. We trust what they know because we identify with them, as they identify with us. We want to know from them not just *what* knowledge but *whose* knowledge.

The cultivation of knowledge has a subtle yet powerful corollary: the *cultivation of the ignorable*. We ignore far more than we pay attention to. Again, we have to, living just one life with one set of eyes and ears. If you sleep 8 hours a day, you have 5,844 waking hours a year, or 350,630 waking minutes. If you spent one waking minute with every one of the 335 million people currently in the United States (and assuming that the population doesn't increase), it would take you almost a thousand years—955 years, to be exact. As of 2022, there were 240 million Facebook accounts in the United States. It would take you 684 years to spend a minute with each of those people. That is a lot of experience about the world that you are never going to be able to have even a minute to learn about. You must ignore most of that potential knowledge. And you must do so without even having a look or a listen to find out whether that knowledge would be relevant and trustable for your own life and circumstances.

We handle this problem socially, as we do most things. We look to the communities and networks with which we identify in order to, in effect, prescreen what to ignore. “Confirmation bias” is a common term that tries to get at this phenomenon. I prefer to think of it as *identity bias*, where we focus on knowledge from social networks we identify with and ignore other knowledge, whether that knowledge confirms or contests what we knew previously.³ What we try to maintain through this form of bias is not a preexisting idea but a preexisting identity—a preexisting node in the web of social relations. Our ideas change more easily than our identities. Nonetheless, if we encounter an idea from outside our cultivation of knowledge and the ignorable, we are unlikely to accept it. Identity bias in a polarized society leads to polarized knowledge. Rural versus urban. Republican versus Democrat. Farmer versus environmentalist. Rich versus poor. Local versus expert. White versus Black. The coasts versus the Midwest. All of which can lead our cultivations to bubble into misunderstanding, conflict, lack of sympathy, and even hate.

The greatest strength of PFI is its success in bursting such bubbles. Its participatory approach cultivates knowledge for an agriculture that is not just sustainable but relational from the get-go. And when you burst those bubbles, you

open up creativity. People's differences in experience and situation start to cross-fertilize one another. One plus one equals not just two, and one plus one plus one equals not just three, but solutions new to everyone. Exchanging ideas creates *grounded knowledge* that links our contexts just as one patch of ground potentially connects to every other, if we take down the fences and try to root across our differences.⁴



Take the presentation by Jason Mauck and Zach Smith at PFI's 2022 annual meeting, Saturday morning at nine o'clock in the main auditorium, talking about what they called "stock-cropping." I spend a good bit of time in agricultural circles. Although I am a college professor, my appointment is in the University of Wisconsin's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. I co-teach an introductory agroecology course with an agronomist and an entomologist. I'm involved in a bunch of grants on (choose your adjective) sustainable, regenerative, resilient, organic, ecological, climate-smart, soil-health-promoting, and alternative agriculture. But I had never heard of "stock-cropping" and the related concept of "enterprise stacking."

Jason and Zach were taking turns with the microphone at the front of the auditorium. Jason passed the mic to Zach to explain how they (along with a couple of other farmers) came up with the idea of stock-cropping. For some years, sustainable farmers have been working out how to graze chickens outdoors with "chicken tractors," an idea originally promoted by Joel Salatin, a farmer in Virginia. Instead of raising chickens in huge confinement barns with tens of thousands of birds per building, with one or two square feet of living space each, and instead of having to bring the feed to the birds and then dispose of their manure, the chicken tractor brings the birds to the feed and the manure to the crop. A common design is a wooden coop on wheels, suitable for maybe up to a hundred birds, that the farmer periodically moves to give the chickens access to new forage. It lets the chickens live a good chicken life, outdoors with shelter close by when they want it. And it keeps the fields green and growing by having the chickens do the fertilization of the plants through their manure, slowly applied exactly when the growing crop needs it—instead of periodically spreading a layer of manure by machine, often at a rate that is way more than the crops and soil can take up and hold onto, leaching pollution into the groundwater and off-gassing nitrous oxide into the sky. The crops and soil feed the chickens and the chickens feed the crops and soil, with minimal intervention by the farmer and with minimal water pollution and climate damage.

What Jason and Zach worked out, along with Sheldon Stevermer and Lance Peterson, was basically a chicken tractor for more than one species of animal. It's more of a small moveable barn than a moveable coop. Sheep, goats, chickens, and pigs all flourish together in one unit, with individual pens for each species. All animals eat differently. By moving this multispecies tractor daily across a field, one species feasts on what the other leaves behind, maximizing ecological and economic gain. (The ecological and the economic do not necessarily have to collide. Indeed, they had better not, if we are to sustain ourselves and the land.) They laughingly call it the "cluster cluck" system.

The other key feature is interweaving this mobile barn with Jason's "strip cropping," which lays down lanes of pasture grass between strips of corn, and with his "relay cropping," in which he plants a new crop before even harvesting the current one. The strips of pasture and relays of crops help keep the ground alive and covered, holding onto the soil, and also give more light and thus more growth to the strips of corn. The "stock-cropper" barn—the "cluster cluck"—then moves down those strips and relays, fertilizing them without chemicals and "stacking" the enterprises by integrating crops and animals. Instead of just corn, you also get four species of meat to sell. Instead of monoculture, you get diversity. Instead of paying out for a big machine or a big barrel of chemicals, you get something that you can build yourself and adapt to your own farm and your own circumstances. Now that's practical.

But changing farming practices isn't like changing your socks. Jason and Zach can explain stock-cropping in about ten minutes. If you're familiar with Iowa farming, it's not complex. Yet that doesn't mean you're going to take up the practice. You have to identify with it too.

Zach explained his own identity transformation. "For the last fifteen to twenty years, I'd been in what people would I guess ascribe to the big ag space," Zach said to the crowd. He'd been selling chemicals and seed as well as raising corn and soybeans on his family's farm, which became his when his father retired in 2013. "Everything you'd see in conventional agriculture, that was what I was a part of." But something didn't fit: "At forty-two years old, I was kind of in this midlife crisis." Zach had implemented some conservation practices on his farm, yet he was feeling the constant pressure to work the land harder and to get bigger, bigger, and bigger. It didn't sit right. He was bothered that he was contributing to what he calls the "funnel of consolidation" in agriculture.

The way it's going right now, we're just going to have a few companies left and a few farmers left at the end. My goal is not to end up one of potentially

ten farms to farm a county and be the proud owner of an X9 combine [a top-of-the-line John Deere machine]. I just don't know if the path that we're on right now, where you just have a few left doing this, is really at the end of the day going to be good for our soil, our communities, and our general way of life.⁵

Most PFI farmers have gone through a personal crisis of some sort that shocked them out of the way they had been farming. Farming is a buzz, as this book calls it. It's not just a way to cultivate yield but a way to cultivate a self, in all its spellbinding eco-sociality. It's an all-consuming experience that catches you like surf in that ocean of hills, and that you ride as best you can on your surfboard of a farm. So much to do. So little time. So little margin for error. Doing and being merge into a *phenomenology of farming*, farming as an experience, dependent upon your knowledge cultivations and what and whom you have decided you must trust—and how you therefore envision and enact your own self. It is pretty hard to switch surfboards mid-ride.

Yet Zach did. He did because he came to question not just his trust in the knowledge he had cultivated (and what he had ignored) but his trust in the social relations of that knowledge, and in whom those relations were for and against. Farming had come to seem anti-farmer. The “conventional agriculture” he was “part of” was attacking his soil, his communities, his way of life. There are moments when we all—not just farmers—come to question the interests behind knowledge and its social relations. Sometimes it's a general growing feeling. It seems to have been for Zach. Sometimes, as this book describes, a specific incident sets that questioning off. A brush with cancer. A market crash. A crop failure. A call from the bank about your loans.

For farmers, to question the real interests behind the crops in your fields is to interrogate the many-thousand-year-old history of rural exploitation. It is to ask why there are higher poverty rates in the countryside than in the city in nearly every country in the world, the United States included. Worldwide, 83 percent of poverty is rural, even though only about 43 percent of people now live in rural areas.⁶ The city accumulates from the countryside—from its crops, forests, and mines, and from the generally poorly paid people who extract those riches from the ground and from what grows upon it. For what is the city but the rural piled high?

In recent years, there has been much talk in U.S. politics about rural resentment. Some respond that the city actually doles out a steady stream of welfare for farmers—call it farm-fare—in the form of massive crop subsidy payments and the extra costs of providing services to rural places, such as broadband, the road

network, and health care.⁷ But when a farmer comes down with cancer, or sees how those subsidies ultimately just tighten margins and are mainly scooped up by larger farms anyway, the age-old experience of expropriation from the rural by urban-based powers leads one to question who really benefits from the labor and risk of agriculture.

Such doubt can lead to a deep breach and sense of alienation from one's own self and everything one trusts—what this book calls a *phenomenological rupture*. (My students often tease me about this term, which admittedly sounds like a medical problem in your midriff. But it's an ideological problem in your brain-case.) One might recover from that rupture and return to how one was doing and being before. Or one may, in that moment of questioning, tune in to a different cultivation of knowledge and the ignorable. Like that of PFI. Like Zach did, and like Jason, Sheldon, and Lance did too.



Zach, Jason, Sheldon, and Lance are all men, White, and I believe heterosexual too. Most farmers in the United States are. But that's changing fast. Moreover, this homogeneity was never as widespread as it was once considered to be. Because of how we have conventionally defined what constitutes a "farmer," many who farm were not always thought of as farmers. PFI has played an important role in this greater welcome and recognition of the diversity of those who farm. That was already evident twenty years ago and has steadily developed since then, although we still have more joyful work of welcome and recognition to embrace.

Consider that a couple of decades ago, the 2002 U.S. Census of Agriculture tabulated that 73 percent of "farm operators" were men, almost all White, and that 89 percent of "principal operators" were men. To anyone familiar with what actually went into keeping a farm going in 2002, and who was doing that work, it was plain that these figures significantly undercounted women's labor. Household work was considered separate from farm work, and women in farming households did (and do) most of the former. The work women did in the fields, with the livestock, with the machines, and with the record keeping was commonly considered "helping," not farming. Women themselves felt constrained to understate their roles. As this book recounts, many women would describe themselves as a "farm wife" and their male partner as the "farmer." Some still do.

By the 2017 census, however, the percentage of "farm producers" who were men had fallen to 64, and the percentage of men who were "principal producers" had fallen to 71.⁸ Some of that change stems from the census slightly changing its measure from "operators," which included anyone "either doing the work or making day-to-day decisions," to "producers," which included anyone "involved

in making decisions” on the farm—dropping the “doing the work” part and the “day-to-day” part. Many women likely found their roles excluded by the 2012 measure. But the change also reflects the aging farm population and the common fact that women statistically outlive men by around five years and typically partner with men who are older than they are. A generation of farming men is dying off. The average age of “principal operators” was 55.3 years in 2002. By 2017, the average age of “principal producers” had risen to 58.6 years—3.3 years higher, even though the average life expectancy in the United States had risen by just 0.6 years over that time period.⁹ That three-year difference works out to a significant portion of the gender shift on its own, as many older women keep the farm going as principal producer after their male partner has died.

But it’s not only that. Women are taking up farming as farmers, not as “farm wives,” in much greater numbers—especially in sustainable agriculture. The 2017 census tabulated 798,500 female principal producers, more than triple the number of female principal operators in 2002. Walking through the hallways and attending sessions at the annual meeting of Practical Farmers of Iowa, one sees equal numbers of women and men. Perhaps more importantly, the number of men and women presenters is basically the same. At the 2023 annual meeting, 55 men and 58 women presented, and the keynote address was by a woman. There were twelve joint presentations by women and men from the same farm household as well. At this writing, 5 of the 13 members of PFI’s board of directors are women. The president is Nathan Anderson, a man, and the executive director is Sally Worley, a woman. Of PFI’s 40 staff members, just 6 identify as men.

It doesn’t look like this everywhere in agriculture. A colleague of mine attended the 2023 Wisconsin Corn-Soy Expo and told me that “it was like walking back in time.” It was men, men, and more men, especially on stage. The Wisconsin Corn Growers Association (one of the sponsors of that Expo) has only one woman on its board of directors and only two women with voting rights on its various committees. My colleague, a woman, mainly works in sustainable agriculture. It “felt like ten years ago,” she said, to be one of the only women at an agricultural meeting.

It is not just the makeup of PFI and organizations like it that has shifted. So have underlying beliefs and attitudes around gender and equity. Part of this identity transformation entailed men coming to envision their masculinity in a more open way. In the interviews my colleagues Sue Jarnagin, Greg Peter, and Donna Bauer and I conducted, we found that PFI, and the sustainable agriculture movement in general, invites what we termed a more *dialogic masculinity* in place of the monologic masculinity more typical of agriculture. The powerlessness that so many in farming experience within industrial agriculture seems to encourage monologic modes of masculinity—autonomous individualism that tries to assert

complete control in its limited sphere. Monologic masculinity can serve as a kind of social-psychological antidote to dependence and impotence in the face of Big Field, Big Iron, and Big Chemical agriculture, where one is subject to the whims of the market, the banks, and the seasons and reliant on recipes marketed by the implement and pesticide dealers. A dialogic masculinity, by contrast, is what I call in Chapter 8 “a masculinity that talks, a masculinity that comes down from the tractor seat.” It’s not a one-way, my-way, now-outta-my-way vision of manhood, that of a controlling tough guy who cannot engage the views of others or be open about one’s uncertainties and mistakes. Rather, dialogic masculinity is an interactive vision of manhood that gains efficacy through mutualism.

Central to that mutualism is the recognition of women as farmers. Farm households become households of farmers. These changes have not always come easily. Women organized through groups like the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network, which was founded in 1994 by Denise O’Brien, an Iowa organic farmer, and has now widened its mission to include advocating for nonbinary farmers as well. And there were many tough conversations in farm households. But, by and large, the men listened, at least in PFI. It has made for a more *relational agriculture* that appreciates the full social and ecological diversity of agriculture and its embeddedness in gender relations.¹⁰

Dialogic masculinity also changes how men engage with other men. Zach and Jason talk openly about their doubts and failures amid their successes. They synergize ideas with each other as well as with their friends Sheldon and Lance. And they don’t suspiciously hide their discoveries and challenges, worried that in an individualistic and competitive marketplace you can’t give your neighbor an edge. Rather, they present what they know at a PFI meeting. And they share the microphone.



Looking back now, a striking flaw in the first edition of *Farming for Us All* was something no one involved in producing the book noted at the time: the cover. The design tried to resonate with the “us all” in the title by using a gallery of five portraits along the bottom edge, including two men, two women, and a young boy. Above the gallery, the main image was of two adult hands cupping rich, dark soil (with several worms in it), which they offered to a third hand, clearly that of a child, evoking sustainability’s intergenerational promise. A balance of men and women, old and young. Nice. But everyone on the cover was White.

We didn’t even think of it. I’m White, my collaborators on the project were White, and the editor at Penn State University Press was White too. We were blinded by that (at the time) unremarked privilege, unattuned to the narratives

the cover excluded. It is heartening, though, that such a cover would not go unremarked today. In my first discussion with the editor for this edition, that was one change we immediately decided was essential. The relationality of agriculture extends beyond the welcoming of women as farmers. *PFI*'s recent work, and that of the sustainable agriculture movement more generally, increasingly proceeds from this wider embrace of agriculture's diversity and a deeper understanding of its troubled history. Thus the cover for this edition does not present a particular social heritage of American farming.

A century ago, there were 950,000 Black farm operators in the United States, about 14 percent of a total of 6.5 million farm operators.¹¹ Today, there are only 35,000 Black farm producers, about 1 percent of the current U.S. total of 3.5 million farm producers. A staggering 95.4 percent are White. A few percent are of Latino and other heritages. The disparity is particularly wide in Iowa. As of the 2017 agricultural census, the entire state has only 98 Black farm producers out of a total of 145,000. Another 187 producers are Asian, 229 are Native American, and 737 are Latino. Altogether, that's less than one percent of Iowa farm producers.¹²

The Homestead Act of 1862 set the stage for these wide disparities. With that act, the federal government awarded settlers who lasted five years and made some improvements 160 acres of land—free. As of November 2022, the average price of an acre of Iowa farmland was \$11,441. Those 160-acre homestead allotments were worth, in today's money, \$1.8 million dollars. That's a heck of a wealth creation starter package for the immigrant groups, mainly European, fortunate enough to be welcomed into the United States in 1862 and the years following.

They often came with very little, to be sure. Millions of families suffered for centuries under serfdom and other deprivations of feudalism. As a serf, one's person was not owned, but one was legally bound to a particular village and required to work the fields belonging to the lord of that village. You could not move to another village where, say, a different lord offered better conditions. If your village was sold to another lord, your right to a living space and your work obligations went with it. You were a chattel of the land. There was little opportunity to create wealth and opportunity for your family.

But the rise of democracy was quickly withering that land bondage. France abolished serfdom in 1789. Most German states abolished it shortly afterwards, beginning with the duchy of Schleswig in 1797. Most other European states did likewise in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Serfdom held on longer in Russia. Finally, Tsar Alexander abolished serfdom there, too, in 1861. The very next year, the Homestead Act was signed. Fantastic timing for Russian peasants.

Slavery was also in the process of being abolished. (The 1860s were an amazingly transformative decade.) President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the year after the Homestead Act, and some freed folk were able to make use of the Homestead Act and General Sherman's 1865 promise of "forty acres and a mule" to the formerly enslaved.¹³ But it's one thing to get access to land and quite another to keep it and to get access to the markets, the loans, and the government programs required to capitalize on it. Many racialized barriers remained. And Native folks could access the Homestead Act only if they renounced their tribal affiliations. The land steadily Whitened—especially in the Midwest.

But Iowa's beautiful land could support more diverse farmers, just as it could support more diverse crops.



Recognizing this potential for greater diversity hinges in part on how one defines a "farm" and how that definition can exclude voices from the farming conversation. In the twenty years since the first edition of this book, the sustainable agriculture movement has worked hard to expand our view of what a farm is. I remember a good friend—a PFI member and a White man—who wondered if his three-acre CSA operation counted as a "farm." (CSA stands for "community-supported agriculture," a now-popular arrangement in which households sign up for weekly shares of a season's worth of vegetables from the same grower.) He contended it would have to be considered more than a "garden," despite the huge grain farms around him with hundreds to thousands of acres each. "I think you should call my place a farm," he added, since he made a substantial part of his living from it. Yet it was something he had to defend.

But today, PFI puts a significant focus on CSAs and on urban agriculture. Some White men farm differently, of course, like my friend. Those historically excluded from farming are especially likely to. There were nine presentations about CSA at the 2023 annual meeting, almost all by women. The keynote speaker, Donna Pearson McClish, gave a presentation about her experience as a Black, multi-generational urban farmer in Wichita, Kansas. In other words, broadening the understanding of what a farm is immediately broadens our understanding of who a farmer is.

The rise of "urban agriculture"—a phrase that no longer seems paradoxical—has been particularly important for welcoming and recognizing the contributions of diverse farmers. It's an enormous financial challenge to get into grain and livestock agriculture, as the margins are low and the land base required is huge.

Urban agriculture, including peri-urban agriculture, typically focuses on fresh vegetables. A farmer can make a living from them with less land. True, farmable land in and near cities is much more expensive because of development pressures. But people find little pockets here and there, often with the support of government and nonprofits. The city is increasingly becoming a place for growing, not only for eating. Black, Latino, Hmong, Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic farmers, many of them women and many of them young, have all been creating spaces to plant and to continue to cultivate their traditions of agricultural knowledge. Along the way, noncommercial agriculture has been rebounding in cities as well, as people of all heritages rediscover the joys of growing—whether in their backyards, with pots on their apartment balconies, or in the many community gardens that have been springing up in parks, schoolyards, and previously neglected city lots.

But there are other terms we still need to contest. There has long been great concern in sustainable agriculture circles about the fate of the “family farm.” Much of that concern has been a way to challenge the increasing industrialization of agriculture, which shoves more and more small farms into the funnel of consolidation that Zach talked about, eroding both the soil and the economic basis of small- and mid-scale agriculture. There is conceptual danger in that term, however. It conjures up a particular vision of agriculture’s social basis: that it ought to be organized around the heterosexual and the nuclear.¹⁴ Say the phrase “family farm” and a slide show starts up in the mind, with images of a solid-looking man in a feed cap and jeans standing by the barn with his wife—she perhaps in jeans, too, but with at least a ghost of a vision of a gingham dress—and two to four kids, five to fifteen years old, the younger ones blonder, all arranged in a group by height, and likely everyone White. Not American Gothic so much as a rural Brady Bunch.

Such mental slides have some striking absences. Families, like love and farming, are diverse. We organize ourselves into many more forms of family farm than a heterosexual couple with a thousand acres and an X9 combine. Gender is diverse. Sexuality is diverse. Farming is diverse. And what makes a family doesn’t necessarily have to do with any of those.

So should we just recognize that “family” comes in many varieties, like so many fields of flowers, and then, noting that, carry on with the term “family farm”? That would be better, but we would still need to trouble the phrase. Is it really “family” that we should be working to protect and enhance? Family is great, and I cherish my own. But sustainable agriculture, like the good things in all of social life, has many other forms of social organization than the family. Community-supported agriculture is one example. So too are farms organized

around heritage traditions. The Afro-Indigenous farming traditions of New York's Soul Fire Farm. The Jewish farming traditions of North Carolina's Yesod Farm and Kitchen. The Muslim farming traditions of New York's Halal Pastures. The Catholic farming traditions of the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wisconsin.¹⁵ The many Hutterite colonies of Great Plains states and Canadian provinces. Sustainable farms may also be organized as worker-owned cooperatives, such as Iowa's Humble Hands Harvest. Or they may spring up from farm incubators, such as Wisconsin's Farley Center. And there are possibilities we have not even conceived of yet.

Plus the term "family farm" leaves out of view more than a third of those who farm. In addition to the 3.5 million farm producers in the United States, at least 2.2 million "farm workers" earn wages through farming—75 percent of them foreign born, mostly from Mexico.¹⁶ It is curious that common language would make this distinction. All "farm producers" do at least some of the work on farms (even if it is only the work of decision-making), and all "farm workers" help them produce.¹⁷ Farmers work and farmworkers farm. Fundamentally, the distinction rests on who has gained rights to a farm's land base, through owning it, renting it, leasing it, signing a crop-share contract, or engaging in some other means of land tenure. Such language is thus a curiosity of capitalism. And perhaps of racial and ethnic privilege as well, for although 95.4 percent of U.S. farm producers are White, only 24 percent of "farm workers" identify as White.¹⁸

Used in this way, the term "farmer" renders anonymous the work of millions who are already largely invisible. This erasure carries on into how farm organizations define themselves. Farm Bureau provides basically no services to—as we should more accurately term them—farm employees.¹⁹ Their focus is almost entirely on farm employers, those they term "farmers." The National Farmers Union in the United States, alas, does little better, stating that its mission is "to protect and enhance the economic well-being and quality of life for family farmers, fishers, ranchers and rural communities."²⁰ Its "Fairness for Farmers" campaign contests how "decades of consolidation in the agriculture industry have devastated family agriculture"—a worthy goal in my view (and I am a Farmers Union member), but one that does not also encompass the concerns of farm employees, many of them migrants with uncertain legal status and abusive working and living conditions.²¹

Some farm organizations have been working to integrate the concerns of farm employers and farm employees (albeit usually retaining the language of "farmers" versus "farm workers"). The Rural Coalition is one. Via Campesina is another. The National Farmers Union of Canada explicitly provides a membership category for farm workers. In the early twentieth century, the Farmer-Labor

Party of the United States went even further and worked to unify farmers with all those who labor—rural and urban.²² Imagine if the major political parties sought to build common cause with farmers and labor. Much-needed unity would result both within rural areas and between the rural and the urban.

Closely associated with the term “family farm” is another term we should trouble: “century farm.” Several states operate programs that award certificates or other forms of recognition to farms with, as the program in Iowa describes it, “consecutive ownership within the same family for 100 years or more of at least 40 acres of the original holding.”²³ Families that maintain ownership for 150 years or more can be enrolled in Iowa’s “heritage farm” program, or what Wisconsin calls a “sesquicentennial farm.” Families take great pride in these designations, and given all the pressures on farming, both social and economic, such continuity is remarkable. But these programs do not ask some potentially painful questions. Whose land was it before these farms were developed? How did these families gain their ownership, and what privileges of life supported them in retaining it?

Because there were farmers in Iowa, Wisconsin, and elsewhere in the United States well before these century and sesquicentennial farms were established. First Nations folk had already been farming here for millennia. A couple of hundred are still farming in Iowa, as I noted in the previous section. Many more would if they had more of their land and wealth restored. The main tribes in Iowa were the Ioway, for whom the state is named, and the Sioux, for whom Sioux City, Iowa’s fourth-largest city, is named. Some fifteen other tribes also lived in Iowa, including the Sauk, the Meskwaki, the Ho-Chunk, and the Potawatomi. Few remain today—only about fifteen thousand tribal members, one of the lowest totals of any state.²⁴ There is just one small reservation entirely or mainly within Iowa, the Meskwaki Settlement.²⁵ Iowa’s fertile farmland was too tempting for settlers and the agricultural industry. The legacy of coercion and violence is heavy indeed.

Perhaps we also need to speak of—and celebrate and restore—“millennium farms.” Even “millennia farms.”



There’s an old, sardonic joke that farmers sometimes tell. “Want to make a small fortune in farming? Start with a large one.” This kind of grim humor arises from the sense of crisis that most in farming feel, farm employers and farm employees alike. Even for those advantaged by the Homestead Act of 1862 and other privileges, like loans and market access, farming is rarely an easy livelihood. Yes, identity and knowledge mutually cultivate the successes of the sustainable agriculture movement. Nonetheless, huge economic challenges remain.

It's no coincidence that Practical Farmers of Iowa began in 1985, in the midst of the infamous "farm crisis" of the mid-1980s, when farmland values crashed following a temporary embargo on grain exports to Russia. The farm crisis led more people to question the wisdom of the industrial model of agriculture and its unending appetite for land base, due to the lower margins that come with industrialism's tendency toward overproduction. Not only was production going up but farm size was, too, because if your margin goes down, you have to make it up by producing more. The average size of an Iowa farm in 1950 was 169 acres, little more than the original 140-acre allotments of the Homestead Act. By 1982, it was 283 acres, a 67 percent increase.²⁶ The number of farms in Iowa collapsed accordingly—from 203,159 in 1950 to 115,413 in 1982. Farmers were feeling threatened. They still are. As of 2020, the average Iowa farm is 360 acres, and there are 85,000 farms.²⁷ In reality, the farm crisis never ended. And it began well before the 1980s.

So what's a farmer to do except to follow U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's often repeated advice from the 1970s and "get big or get out"? Because as a later U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Purdue, put it in 2019, "In America, the big get bigger and the small go out." Appalling as these statements were, especially from secretaries of agriculture, they referenced a powerful force farmers must nonetheless contend with: the dynamics of that funnel of consolidation.

More land isn't the only way to increase your production of low-margin farm commodities, though. You can also do it by investing in machines, chemicals, and seeds that pump up the volume. And you might get a temporary edge—until your neighbors do it too. Then everyone is stuck with higher costs and higher production, and thus lower margins, as prices fall in response to the higher production. Desperate, you try the next new bit of techno-wizardry, and the cycle repeats as your neighbors try it too. The agricultural economist Willard Cochrane long ago called it the "treadmill of technology."²⁸ Once you're on it, it's hard to get off—unless you're simply forced off, your profit squeezed to nothing. Then your land gets bought up by others, and the fewer, bigger farms repeat the cycle all over again. Perhaps in the end there will be only one farm left, a huge conglomerate that controls everything.

There's also another treadmill you'll have to find your balance on: the subsidy treadmill. In recent years, the U.S. federal government has been paying out around \$20 billion a year in various subsidies for different crops and the different complications and issues that farms face—and as much as \$45 billion in 2020.²⁹ Using the \$20 billion figure works out to about \$10,000 a year per farm. That's a lot of farm-fare for you and your fellow farmers.³⁰ About \$4 billion of those subsidies are for conservation programs, largely for promoting sustainable

practices. That aspect of farm payments is welcome. But in terms of penciling out a living from farming, if other farms are getting this support, too, it enables all of you—or, better put, compels all of you—to cut profit margins that much further. Because if one of you does, the rest eventually will have to as well.

You can try to maintain your footing on these two treadmills in some other ways. You might cut the wages of your farm employees. You might sacrifice your stewardship of the land, water, and climate and forgo the conservation subsidies for the crop subsidies. You might do whatever you can do—and perhaps some things you really shouldn't and don't want to do—in the midst of this permanent farm crisis, trying to “stay in the game” as long as you can. But of one result you can pretty much be sure: overall production will go up in the process, even if few farmers are making any more money. Thus in many ways it is more apt to call the overall situation a “treadmill of production.”³¹

Now consider the specific regional context of your farm. Factor that in and you're looking at what *Farming for Us All* calls the *farmer's problem*. If you had a good year and got good yields, likely other farms like yours in your area did as well. They were on the treadmill of production too. Consequently, you may have plenty to sell, but prices are bad. So you don't make much. If you had a bad year with bad yield, likely other farms like yours in your area also did poorly. They probably made much the same bet with technology—and with the banks, so that they could afford it. They probably also filled out the same paperwork and went after the same farm subsidies. So prices may be good because production was low, but you don't have much to sell or to claim subsidies for. You still don't make much. You really only do well when you have a good year and most other farmers like you don't. And that doesn't happen very often.

Consequently, as I mentioned earlier, median farm household income—the midpoint farm in the range of farm household incomes—is typically negative. 2021 was a relatively good year, and the median farm household netted just \$210 from farming.³² That's not a typo. In 2020, the median was a \$1,198 loss. Most U.S. farm households aren't starving. Median farm household income from all sources is around \$85,000 to \$90,000, depending on the year. But pretty much all of that income is from off-farm employment. Driving trucks. Stocking shelves at Walmart. Serving as a nurse at the local health clinic. Teaching at the local community college.

There is yet one more challenge. Except over land base, you're really not in competition with the farm next door. The value of your production, and what you get back for it, has little to do with your neighbor. That value mostly reflects how far removed you are from eaters. It mostly has to do with what Katharine Legun and I have suggested calling *conductors*: those who conduct in the market.³³

In between producers and consumers stretches a vast and bulging middle of processors, wholesalers, and retailers that serve as the conduits between producer and consumer—a position of power that also enables them to be conductors who organize and orchestrate the conduits, mainly with their own interests in mind. Every year the USDA calculates the share of the food dollar that actually gets back to farmers. Every year it goes down a bit further. At this writing, based on figures from 2021, the farm share is the lowest ever: 14.5 cents.³⁴

Which is part of why there are any farms left at all. Investors and conglomerates are snapping up more and more land, which jacks up farmland prices, speeds the treadmill of production even more, and continues the steady decline in the number of farms. They are discovering how to use farm subsidies to become subsidy farmers. But historically, conductors have been cautious about vertically integrating right down to the level of the producer. Conductors would rather not have to take the risks of the farmer's problem. And they want leverage over those who are willing to take those risks. Conductors want their large fortunes to get even larger, not smaller. As the lyrics of a century-old Farmers Union song put it, "the merchant is the one who gets it all."³⁵



But what about feeding the world? Isn't the treadmill of production—greased by the marvelous efficiencies of modern conduction, able to span the globe and ship oranges from South Africa to New York and corn from Nebraska to Cape Town—a good thing overall? Yes, some farmers go by the wayside, but it's crucial that we increase our food production, right? "One U.S. farm feeds 166 people annually in the U.S. and abroad," says the American Farm Bureau. "The global population is expected to increase by 2.2 billion by 2050, which means the world's farmers will have to grow about 70% more food than what is now produced."³⁶ Isn't that true?

No. We don't want to feed the world. We want a world that is fed. We want a world free of the scourge of hunger, yes, but U.S. farms don't feed the hungry. They actually feed the well-fed and the overfed. Because U.S. farms don't give their production away. They sell it. Less than 1 percent of U.S. farm exports goes to the hungriest countries in the world.³⁷ That's because these are all very poor countries. Haiti. Yemen. Ethiopia. Afghanistan. Namibia. The main cause of hunger is poverty, and the poor don't have money to buy food from U.S. farms. Because they are poor.

The United States does provide some free food assistance in times of extreme need and for those facing famine. We are the world's largest provider of international food assistance—about a third of all food aid. In recent years, we've been

providing about \$4 billion a year in food.³⁸ But the total value of U.S. farm exports currently runs at about \$200 billion a year.³⁹ In other words, we provide about 2 percent of our farm exports as food assistance, and we also sell about another 1 percent to very poor and hungry countries. Moreover, we only export about a fifth of our total agricultural production to begin with.⁴⁰ Most of what we grow we consume within the United States. That 2 percent we provide and 1 percent we sell to the hungry works out to 0.6 percent of all that we grow. That does not amount to feeding the world.

Besides, if you don't have much money, your food supply is far more secure if you can provide it for yourself—if you have sovereignty over your food and the resources, especially decent land, to grow it—rather than having to buy it. If we want a world that is fed, we should focus not on feeding the world but on helping the world feed itself.

Much of what we grow in the United States does not become food anyway. As of 2022, 44 percent of the U.S. corn crop gets brewed into ethanol for the gas tanks of cars.⁴¹ The situation is much the same with soybeans, with 42 percent of soybean oil going to concoct biodiesel for trucks.⁴² There are some leftovers after turning corn into ethanol and soybean oil into biodiesel. These distiller's grains, as they're called, can be fed back to livestock, recovering some of their food value. But we could also feed much of our livestock on well-managed grass, growing and glowing across the landscape. And we could also try eating less meat.⁴³

So why do we grow so much in places like Iowa? Because of how the treadmill of production and the farmer's problem promote growing way more than we can eat. Not because we need so much to eat.



But nonetheless, we do need to eat. Human production does have to come from somewhere, and there are a lot of us now. Do it wrong, and we mess up the world pretty badly. Climate change. Biodiversity loss. Soil loss. Water and air pollution. Dire inequalities in the impacts. We don't have to descend into Malthusian doomsday thinking, though. We can have an agricultural landscape that is “multifunctional”—a landscape that sustains us all, human and nonhuman alike, with more justice and deeper mutuality.

Iowa used to have such a landscape. Before the coming of the unrelenting productivism of post-World War II agricultural industrialism, there was still room for more than humans and for the mutual support the intertwined lives of all species provide one another. As Laura Jackson observed in her keynote address at the 2022 Practical Farmers of Iowa meeting, “There were many, many places in those early years—the teens and twenties—in which you could say this

is an agricultural landscape and a prairie landscape at the same time.” There was still space to appreciate, in Laura’s words, “the majesty and the diversity of pre-invasion Iowa.” Today that diversity is now confined to the few little remnants that have never been plowed. Like Rochester Cemetery in Rochester, Iowa: on those eighty acres, Laura said, one can still find more than four hundred species of plants alone.

“Would that be possible today?” she challenged the audience. Could we have that kind of balance on a wide scale again, and not just in a few unusual situations, like that cemetery? Could we have an agriculture that stores and restores carbon rather than pumping it up into the atmosphere? Could we have an agriculture that builds rather than loses soil? Could we have an agriculture that supports our communities, providing fair wages and maintaining crucial institutions like schools, health care, and the gathering places that deepen our ties with one another? Could we have an agriculture that provides healthy food without the poison, the dangerous machines, the pressure to compromise social justice and ecological well-being? Could we really have farming for us all?

For members of PFI and organizations like it across the United States and around the world, there is a growing appetite to farm more sustainably. They often use different vocabularies. Some describe what they do as agroecology (my own favored term). Others as regenerative agriculture. Still others as organic agriculture, renewable agriculture, food sovereignty, urban agriculture, permaculture, biodynamics, climate-smart agriculture, ecological farming, alternative agriculture, peasant agriculture, community agriculture, and more.⁴⁴ But these are all shades of a common green realization: we know we can farm differently because so many farmers already do.

We can eat differently, too, and millions already are. Some 140,000 U.S. farms now sell at least part of their yield directly to stores, restaurants, institutions, and households—\$10.7 billion dollars’ worth, as of 2020.⁴⁵ Most U.S. cities now have restaurants that serve farm-to-table fare. The number of farmers’ markets in the United States has grown nearly fivefold in the last thirty years, from 1,775 in 1994 to 8,771 as of 2019.⁴⁶ (Madison, Wisconsin, the modest-sized city where I live, now has 15.) Some 10,000 farms operate a CSA for at least part of their sales.⁴⁷ One study tabulated over 18,000 community gardens in the United States.⁴⁸ Organic food claims 15 percent of fruit and vegetable sales in the United States as of 2022, and 6 percent of food sales overall.⁴⁹ Thirty-five percent of U.S. households raise at least some of their own food, whether in the back garden or on a balcony high up in an apartment building.⁵⁰ Gen Z and millennials show particular interest in the pleasures of food as local as you can get: from right outside your own kitchen.⁵¹

Something has changed. It wasn't like this twenty years ago, when the first edition of *Farming for Us All* appeared. A new tide is rising. It is rising in part through better government policies, like the Conservation Stewardship Program of the National Resources Conservation Service; the USDA organic certification program (which only dates from 1997); the nutrient management planning implemented by county, state, and provincial governments; and the increased commitment to sustainable practices by agricultural extension services. It is rising through better policies by institutions outside of government, including businesses, nonprofits, and universities that seek to encourage greener and fairer food through their food purchasing and provisioning, implementing standards like the Fair Food Program of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a worker-driven partnership that began among Florida tomato pickers and retailers. And it is rising from a sea change in university research and education, where words like “sustainable,” “organic,” and “agroecology” no longer need to be said in hushed tones lest the administrators at our colleges of agriculture overhear—and where students pack courses with these words in their titles.⁵²

But what really underlies it all is that people now identify with a different ethic—an ethic of care for each other and the earth. I know that sounds rather hearts-and-flowers, a Mother's Day card of concern and respect. But we really should love our ultimate mother. Increasingly, we do.

That is the central point of this book: identity can overcome economics. Identity is both social and ecological. You've heard it before, but it really is true: it's all about relations. Yes, the deck is stacked against us. Yet we can cultivate different ways to be and thus different ways to know and do. Practical Farmers of Iowa has shown us that such a transformation is as possible as it is necessary. So have the thousands of other sustainable food and agriculture groups that have sprung up all across the United States and the world, like grasses greening back the land after a prairie fire.



In June 2023, I found myself in Iowa again, singing a song that had come to me as I was driving to that Practical Farmers of Iowa meeting the year before. My friends Jason and Ehler from the Barn Owl Band backed me up on fiddle and bouzouki as I sang these words at our concert in Ames, right in the center of the Des Moines Lobe, the fertile center of all that is Iowa and not the Ioway.

*Acres and acres of corn
Riches I fear we must mourn
Green gold concealing the feeling of stealing*

*From those who have yet to be born
Acres and acres of corn*

*Acres and acres of beans
Feed to the mouths of machines
I know that they tell us and sell us its well for us
I think that's not all that it means
Acres and acres of beans*

*Acres and acres of yield
From every quilted green field
Fills me with sadness not gladness this madness
The iron and poison we wield
Acres and acres of yield*

*Acres and acres of cash
Seeded by greed and by gash
Think it will dry up and fry up and die up
When comes the climate's great crash
Acres and acres of cash*

*Acres and acres of hope
Restoring each gullied brown slope
It's not too late friends don't wait friends for fate friends
To tumble us from this tight rope
Acres and acres of hope*

Acres and acres of hope. That's precisely what Practical Farmers of Iowa cultivates.

—MMB, Madison, Wisconsin, December 2023

NOTES FOR THE PREFACE

1. Smiley ([1991] 1998, 16).
2. Median farm income was negative in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2020 and only very slightly positive in 2019; see USDA Economic Research Service (2021) and the more detailed discussion later in the preface.
3. This term is not from the original edition of *Farming for Us All*. I am introducing it here. Closely related is the concept of “interests bias” that I discuss briefly in Bell (2018, 226).
4. Ashwood et al. (2014).
5. Here, I am quoting from Zach’s presentation at PFI’s online annual meeting in 2021.
6. The 83 percent figure for total rural poverty comes from the United Nations Development Programme and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2022), and it is based on the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index for the period 2016 to 2019. Using purely financial metrics, Castañeda et al. (2018) calculated that 80 percent of world poverty is rural, based on 2014 data. The figure for 43 percent of world population as rural is from the World Bank (2022).
7. Krugman (2022).
8. At this writing, in the summer of 2023, the results of the 2017 census are the most recent available.
9. It’s actually fallen a bit since 2017, in part due to the COVID pandemic.
10. Leslie, Wypler, and Bell (2019).
11. U.S. Agricultural Census for 1920, page 295, table 2, from the USDA Census of Agriculture Historical Archive, https://agcensus.library.cornell.edu/census_year/1920-census/.
12. Race figures for Iowa farm producers from National Agricultural Statistics Service (n.d.), reporting on the 2017 agricultural census.
13. As well as the Southern Homestead Act of 1866.
14. Leslie, Wypler, and Bell (2019).
15. Crider (2021).
16. See Legal Services Corporation (2022) for the total number of U.S. “farm workers.” Their figures are likely an underestimate, as many “farm workers” have uncertain legal status and thus are difficult to enumerate. On the percentage of foreign-born farm workers, see Hernandez and Gabbard (2018) on the results of the 2015–16 National Agricultural Workers Survey.
17. Janes Ugoretz (2023).
18. Hernandez and Gabbard (2018). Although 24 percent of “farm workers” identify as White, 83 percent identify as members of Hispanic groups, indicating that some identify as both Hispanic and White.
19. Janes Ugoretz (2023).
20. National Farmers Union, “About NFU,” accessed June 19, 2023, at <https://nfu.org/about/>.
21. National Farmers Union, “Fairness for Farmers: A Farmers Union Project,” accessed June 19, 2023, at <https://nfu.org/fairness-for-farmers/>.
22. A remnant of the Farmer-Labor Party exists to this day as the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, now an affiliate of the U.S. Democratic Party. I thank my good colleague Nan Enstad for deepening my understanding of the history of who is considered to be a “farmer.”
23. Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, “Century Farm Program / Heritage Farm Program,” accessed June 19, 2023, at <https://iowaagriculture.gov/century-and-heritage-farm-program>.
24. Wise Voter (2023).
25. The adjacent states of Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have many reservations, two of which—Nebraska’s Omaha and Winnebago reservations—extend slightly into Iowa.

26. See U.S. Bureau of the Census (1984), table 1.
27. National Agricultural Statistics Service (2021).
28. Cochrane (1958).
29. USDA Economic Research Service (2023b).
30. Carr and Schechinger (2021).
31. Schnaiberg (1980).
32. USDA Economic Research Service (2022c). To be sure, some of this low farm income may be because of accounting practices that enable farmers to hide their income from the IRS.
33. Legun and Bell (2016).
34. Technically, it is the lowest ever recorded, as we only have this data back until 1993. USDA Economic Research Service (2022d).
35. I am quoting “The Farmer Is the Man,” which I sometimes sing as “The Farmer Is the One.”
36. American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture (2021).
37. Schechinger and Cox (2016).
38. U.S. Government Accountability Office (2023).
39. USDA Economic Research Service (2023b).
40. Ibid.
41. USDA Economic Research Service (2023a).
42. USDA Economic Research Service (2022b).
43. Mayerfeld (2023).
44. Newton et al. (2020).
45. USDA Economic Research Service (2022a).
46. Ibid.
47. Numbers vary widely, though, depending on the methods used to tabulate the number of CSAs.
48. This is a commonly cited figure on the web, attributed to the American Community Gardening Association at sources such as this one from the Boston Public Library: <https://guides.bpl.org/communitygardening>. I regard the figure as somewhat squishy, though.
49. German (2023).
50. Mayers (2023).
51. Ibid.
52. I can report that these really were words that could get you into trouble in our colleges of agriculture twenty years ago—and even ten years ago. In some situations, they still do, but that is becoming less common.

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